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Family Spy Case Called A 'Serious Loss' to U.S.

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WASHINGTON, May 30 — Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger said today that the United States had suffered "a serious loss" because of the activities of John A. Walker Jr., his brother and son, who are accused of giving information to the Soviet Union.

Mr. Weinberger said the Defense Department would strengthen its security procedures as a result.

American military and intelligence officials say they have not yet learned and may never know how much classified information the Walkers may have sold to the Soviet Union.

But, considering the wide range of highly sensitive material that could have passed through their hands, military and civilian intelligence officials said the United States might find it more difficult to recover from the harm caused by this case than it has from many other previous spy cases.

Extent of Damage Uncertain

The Navy was still trying to assess the damage today, officials said. One official said the Navy "does not yet know when John Walker first started working" for the Soviet Union.

Mr. Walker, a retired, 47-year-old communications specialist, served 21 years in the Navy, at least six of them aboard submarines and at command centers in Norfolk, where he had access to material classified as "top secret," the most sensitive broad catagory of classification. He did not have access to "sensitive compartmented information," a subcatagory of intelligence information of the very highest sensitivity.

His son, Yeoman 3d Class Michael L. Walker, 22, served aboard the aircraft carrier Nimitz, where he had access to information classified as "secret" until he was arrested and charged with espionage last week.

In addition, John Walker's brother, Arthur J. Walker, a 50-year-old retired Navy lieutenant commander who worked for a military contractor, was also charged with passing sensitive military information to the Soviet Union.

Antisubmarine Data Called Vital

Of all the material the Walkers may have passed to Soviet agents, intelligence officials said, they are most concerned about the details of American antisubmarine warfare that John Walker might have sold.

"Submarines are by far the most secret service we have," said a leading expert in the field, who did not want to be identified. "Their whole trade is stealth." The Navy's attitude now, he added, "must be one of absolute horror — something fundamental has been taken away from them."

A former senior intelligence official who has been briefed on the case said there was an "assumption" that "there is the very real possibility of widespread" damage to antisubmarine warfare tactics. The information that was sold could have been "very broad," he added.

The officials cited several principal areas of concern. Among them, they said, was that Mr. Walker may have given Soviet agents precise information about the capabilities of American hydrophones, underwater microphones placed in strategic locations around the world to track Soviet submarines.

Submarine Tracking Systems

Submarines cannot be detected when traveling below a certain speed, said Gene R. LaRocque, a retired admiral who now runs the Center for Defense Information. At certain low speeds they do not make enough noise, he added, and Soviet officials "would love to know" what that speed is.

Mr. Walker or his son might have sold that information or other information that would allow Soviet officials to determine the optimal speed, Admiral LaRocque and others said.

At various points in his career, John Walker also had access to information plotting the locations of American submarines on secret patrols. That would enable Soviet naval officers to determine the effectiveness of their own submarine tracking systems, several officials said.

In addition, Mr. Walker or his son could have given Soviet agents some of the "very frank" after-exercise reports that naval commanding officers make, said one senior official with extensive naval operational experience. "The Navy operates more closely to wartime conditions than any other service" when it conducts its peacetime exercises and operations, the official said.

'Frank Reports About Defects'

"At the conclusion of such exercises, the task force makes very frank reports about defects," he added. "They might report, for example, that 'we can't jam such and such a radio frequency,' or that 'we don't see anything in sight in the next five years that will solve the following problem.' "

This kind of information could be "devastating" if disclosed, the official said.

A central concern is that the United States may not be able to recover from these disclosures alleged in the current case as easily as it has from many others. Most espionage cases involve information about a specific piece of equipment or certain classifed codes that can be changed or replaced.

But in this case all the Walkers' alleged disclosures put together could have given away large-scale, fundamental information about antisubmarine warfare capabilities operations and techniques that are not easily changed.

In antisubmarine warfare, one intelligence official said, "There are certain basics built in that are hard to move around."

"Every spy case does damage," a former senior official said, "but this one could be even harder to recover from."

'We Want to Keep Them Guessing'

Several officials said the United States hoped the details of the intelligence losses in this case would never be disclosed. "We don't want to add to the seriousness of the loss by discussing in detail what was taken," Secretary Weinberger said.

If the Soviet Union "got a lot of useful information," one intelligence official said, "it's not in our interest for them to know it." On the other hand, the official added, if Soviet agents got little information of value, "it's in our interest to make them think it is important; we want to keep them guessing."

In the end, several officials said, the United States might never know how much information the Walkers may have sold unless it goes to war with the Soviet Union.

If Soviet officials acquired especially valuable information, it is not in their interest for the United States to know they have it. They may "hold it in reserve," one official said, and use the information "only when we are at war, when it is really important."

A former senior intelligence official said, "The answer to that is maybe we have some successes somewhere" from intelligence agents that the United States is holding in reserve, too.